

Rice takes Dist. 2

Published on: Thursday, September 16, 2010

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ROCKVILLE — Delegate Craig Rice (D-Dist. 15) has secured the Democratic primary for the most hotly contested District 2 seat on Montgomery County Council, easily defeating former Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson (D) of Montgomery Village with more than 47 percent of the votes as of Wednesday.

“This is a result of a lot of hard work we did on the ground, knocking on doors,” Rice said Tuesday night at a gathering at Rockville’s Austin Grill. The tense mood at the restaurant around 8 p.m. after polls closed changed to frenzied jubilation when election results began to roll in and the gathering turned into a victory party for Rice’s supporters.

“I wasn’t expecting this margin actually,” Rice said. “I’m thrilled!”

When Councilman Mike Knapp (D-Dist. 2) announced he would not seek a third term on the council, the allure of an open seat on the council drew in six eager candidates: Rice, Hanson, Sharon Dooley (D), Charles Kirchman (D), Eddie Kuhlman (D) and Robin Ficker (R).

Early numbers put Rice at the forefront of the race with more than half the votes at 9 p.m., with Hanson trailing him with more than a quarter of the remaining votes. By midnight, Rice had secured his victory with 47 percent of the votes and Hanson with 24 percent. Though some local political bloggers predicted a closer race between the two, Rice was certainly the District 2 victor in endorsements garnering support from nearly every interest group, including the SEIU, Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce, Progressive Maryland and NOW-Montgomery County. County Executive Isiah “Ike” Leggett (D) added his endorsement over the summer.

Knapp also endorsed Rice in July, calling the race between the Democratic candidates “four opportunities for it to go in the wrong direction and one opportunity for it to go in the right direction.”

“He represents the future of Montgomery County, and with him on the council, we will continue to move Montgomery County forward,” Knapp said. “I think it’s going to be very important to take someone with Craig’s background in Annapolis and consider his ability to listen to the folks he represents.”

Rice will face off against lone Republican candidate Ficker, who has been the outspoken voice of the unsuccessful signature-collecting movement in protest of the new ambulance fee.

Ficker served as a Republican member of the Maryland House of Delegates from 1979 to 1983. He created quite a stir in the last few years by promoting “Ficker Initiatives,” which called for a series of tax caps, especially for homeowners. And though the council unanimously shot down the initiatives, nearly 200,000 county voters supported his idea.

“I’m in favor of reasonable tax increases, but the council is using the homeowner as an ATM these days,” Ficker said, making reference to recently passed bills like the energy tax. “I believe in efficient government without waste, and right now, the council is part of the problem and not the solution.”

Knapp, who was first elected in 2002, served as the chairman of the council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee and as a member of the Education Committee. Both committees experienced particularly difficult years, as the county sought to fill a nearly \$4.4 billion budget shortfall. A decrease in property taxes were partly to blame for the budget gap and county schools were budgeted \$160 million less than they had hoped for in 2011.

Knapp said he will work with the area's leading biotechnology firms and research centers as the county moves in a new direction to make it a leading research area of the nation. He was a major advocate of the recent adoption of the Great Seneca Science Corridor master plan. Also, this year, the council approved a "biotech bill" Knapp sponsored, which garners \$2 million in tax credits for biotechnology companies. He works as a biotechnology consultant for Celera, a research institute renowned for mapping the human genome.

"Some of my proudest accomplishments are those that tend to get the least attention," Knapp said. "Whether it's new stoplights in Montgomery Village or near the Damascus recreation center, connecting fragments of sidewalks in Germantown, getting fire stations in Germantown and Clarksburg, or ensuring that facilities like the Olney skate park or Germantown Library finally got built, these are the things that directly impact the daily lives of residents. I'm pretty proud of that."